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MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE/EXCLUSIVELY EYES ONLY

URGENT
INFORMATION

July 24, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. KISSINGER

FROM: RICHARD H. SOLOMON

SUBJECT: Mao and Chou Under Pressure?
Some Recent Pieces in the Chinese Puzzle

In view of our discussion of last week on the state of US-PRC relations, a number of recent indicators suggest that the current uncertainty in Peking's dealings with you represents waffling on the part of the leadership in the face of pressures from both the Soviet Union and domestic political forces. Fragmentary evidence suggests that sometime during the middle ten days of July there was a sharp challenge to existing policy lines--perhaps triggered by a combination of the Sino-Soviet border talks and preparations for the forthcoming CCP Central Committee Plenum and Party Congress--and as a result, Mao and Chou have felt the need to back off somewhat from their dealings with us in order to respond to these various pressures.

A Threat from the Soviets?

Over the past several months all indications have been of no substantial progress in the desultory Sino-Soviet border negotiations. In mid-June PRC diplomats in Moscow told our embassy officials that there was only slow progress in the Peking-based talks. Unexpectedly on July 16, the Soviets announced the successful conclusion of a Sino-Soviet aviation agreement. This is the first government-to-government agreement since the 1969 border clashes, other than the yearly trade agreements. On July 17, we intercepted a private message indicating that the Russians were sending an airplane to Peking to pick up negotiator Ilichev, who was said to be returning to Moscow "for a vacation." He departed the following day. On the 20th, a Tass report from Peking said that Ilichev had returned to Moscow "on official business." The Chinese have announced neither Ilichev's return, nor the conclusion of the aviation agreement.

These developments suggest that the Chinese reluctantly concluded the air agreement, very likely under some form of Soviet pressure, and that Moscow is using Ilichev's return to create an air of "something going on,"

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if not as a channel for additional pressures on Peking. In the past the Soviets have sought to influence PRC policies through proposals and pressures applied on the eve of leadership meetings, where they know decisions will have to be reached. It is likely that Moscow is aware of the imminent Plenum and Party Congress, and is using what is seen as its strengthened position in the wake of the Washington Summit to pressure the Chinese against sustaining their struggle against "social imperialism" by leaning toward the U.S.

A Domestic Challenge to the Mao/Chou Policy Line?

Press analysis and the logic of events suggest that the forthcoming Chinese leadership meetings will have to confront a broad range of basic political, economic, social, and foreign policies. Several recent bits of evidence imply that Mao and Chou are under pressure to justify their existing positions.

In late June a confidential Central Committee document began circulating in which Mao himself implicitly accepted mass criticism of problems in the "youth to the countryside" program. In an act of solicitude which seems designed to signal to the cadre Mao's awareness of existing difficulties--and thus defuse criticism--the Chairman sent a gift of money to a young man unable to support himself through rural labor, and instructed Premier Chou to investigate the situation and rectify irrationalities.

Late in June Chou's State Council issued a directive ordering the reinstitution of academic-style entrance examinations in an effort to raise the quality of university training. On July 19, this policy received a direct and public challenge from the Manchurian region--base of the powerful military commander Ch'en Hsi-lien--in the form of an authoritative press statement raising "the line question on the whole college entrance examination system." This phrasing is an unusually direct way of challenging existing policy, and raises the possibility that issues beyond educational matters are being raised. It may be significant that this challenge comes from the most sensitive region along the Sino-Soviet border.

While the full dimensions of PRC leadership debate in the context of the coming Plenum and Party Congress are likely to remain well masked behind official silence and ideological rhetoric, it can be assumed from the above fragments of evidence that the formal meetings are precipitating sharp debate on a wide range of existing policies, and that the leadership is having to defend itself against internal criticism--even while trying to cope with Soviet pressure.

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A Time for U.S. Signals?

In the context of the above indications of domestic and Soviet pressures, Chinese actions regarding the U.S. have more the quality of a backing off from the recent high-profile posture of U.S. - PRC normalization than an outright rejection of their policy toward us. Mme. Mao's late June appearance at the basketball performance in Peking was a strong signal -- to us as well as to China's domestic audience -- of support for U.S. - PRC normalization from the one high-level voice that had seemed critical of the policy. And Mao's July 16 meeting with U.S. physicist Yang Chen-ning seemed intended to highlight for Chinese both overseas and domestic the positive linkage between Washington-Peking relations and the Taiwan question.

The Chinese position on Cambodia, and its relation to the timing of your forthcoming visit, seems more an expression of Peking's inability to influence the situation than anything else. In bluntly telling you that it would be of no use to deliver to Sihanouk your position on negotiations of late May, and then proposing August 16 as your arrival date, they were directly stating the futility of talks on Cambodia in the context of the August 15 bombing halt, but leaving you a way out on whether you wanted to confront that issue in such circumstances. It may also be the case that in the context of a Soviet threat, domestic political infighting, and the current American political scene, a visit by you before the Party Congress appeared to hold little prospect of giving Mao or Chou additional positive support, while exposing them to further criticism or pressure.

The only other recent signals we have received which impinge on U.S. - PRC relations are a July 19th overflight of Seventh Fleet ships in the Tonkin Gulf (the first such occurrence since late August 1971), and the July 23 postponement of a tour of China by a delegation of Harvard China scholars (perhaps because of its timing during the leadership meetings). There have been no indications in the press of debate on Peking's policy toward the U.S.

If the interpretation is correct that Mao and Chou are being forced to respond to domestic and Soviet pressures, and wish to sustain their relationship with the U.S. even if circumstances demand lowering its visibility for the time being, the question is whether we just lie low and await some indication from the Chinese of a desire to proceed in active contacts, or whether we take some positive action designed to strengthen Mao/Chou's hand vis-a-vis the Russians and domestic critics. In a situation where our ability to read the nature of the Peking political climate with any accuracy is not high, there is a real

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danger that any action on our part will signal the wrong message and turn out to be counter-productive. However, without proposing to you specific moves at this time, I would suggest that there remains a real need to sound out Chou En-lai on the state of our relations -- and to give him an opportunity to indicate where he might need our backing, particularly regarding the Soviets.

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